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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/05/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)

SUBJECT: PROTESTS OVER SOCIAL BENEFITS CUT SMALL BUT NOVEL

REF: A. MINSK 458

[1](#)B. 06 MINSK 1276

Classified By: Ambassador Karen Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) November 4 witnessed two demonstrations in Minsk against upcoming cuts in social benefits. A total of up to 600 participants took part. The smaller demonstration was the first one held in the center of October Square since March of 2006. Government-organized skinheads marred the larger event by instigating fisticuffs, which were then broadcast on state TV in an attempt to discredit the demonstrations. End summary.

The Main Event: Multiple Factors Limit Turn Out

[1](#)2. (C) On November 4, several hundred demonstrators marched from the Belarusian National Academy of Sciences (BNAS) to the authorized site of isolated Bangalore Square to protest upcoming cuts in in-kind social benefits (ref A) while Ambassador and Emboffs observed. United Democratic Forces (UDF) Co-Chair Sergey Kalyakin, addressing demonstrators, blamed authorities for seizing materials advertising the march and for detaining many of those coming to the demonstration from the regions. Fellow Co-Chair Vintsuk Vyachorka confirmed to A/DCM that his vehicle and a train carrying fellow party members werestopped in Grodno oblast. Press reported that former presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich was also briefly detained in the town of Mosty even though he announced that he would not participate in the march. Poor weather conditions -- freezing temperatures and intermittent sleet -- also kept the turnout down.

Smaller but More Visible Alternate Demonstration

[1](#)3. (SBU) Several scores of protestors, including UDF Co-Chair Anatoliy Lebedko gathered at the center of October Square, the location organizers requested for the demonstration. After a brief demonstration, most of the participants proceeded down crowded Independence Prospect to Independence Square and protested in front of parliament. Emboffs and perhaps one hundred plainclothes security officials observed both downtown demonstrations.

Authorities Vary their Tactics as Well

[1](#)4. (C) Far fewer uniformed officers were present at BNAS, Bangalore, October and Independence Squares than at all other

major demonstrations this year. The reduced number of uniformed officers coincided with the placement of about 50 provocateurs, allegedly members of the previously unheard of group Belaya Volya (White Will), at BNAS. During the march from BNAS to Bangalgore Square, the provocateurs attacked genuine demonstrators with sticks. Despite the numerous security officials filming the march, no arrests were made. A/DCM and A/Pol/Econ Chief witnessed two plainclothes handlers escorting the group away from the march after they had served their purpose.

Comment: GOB Takes Credit When Blame is Due

15. (C) Belarusian authorities have apparently decided that overt thuggish police actions in response to demonstrations do more harm than good. While the use of provocateurs is not new (ref B), inserting an entire contingent into a demonstration to attack demonstrators is a twist, and a new low, for the GOB. State-controlled Belarusian television immediately used coverage of the stunt to claim that opposition demonstrations were not peaceful and to imply that protests as such are dangerous. Whether or not the GOB successfully portrayed the opposition as hooligans, the incident certainly helped distract from the main message that Lukashenko's regime was scaling back social guarantees to pay for failed economic policies.
STEWART